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SUBJECT CIA Revises Estimates of Soviet Oil Production

JANE PAULEY: The conduct of American foreign policy is often based on calculations, sometimes guesswork, on what the Russians are up to. One concern has been a Russia portrayed as hungry and thirsting for oil. Much of U.S. Mideast policy has been based on that. But now, diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb reports the calculations may have been wrong.

MARVIN: The Central Intelligence Agency predicted four years ago that the Soviet Union would have to start importing as much as 3.5 million barrels of oil a day by 1985. A large conclusion flowed from this prediction: that the Russians, especially after their invasion of Afghanistan, might try to seize the Persian Gulf as one way of securing a solid source of foreign oil. In part for this reason, the Reagan Administration has begun to build up American military strength in the area.

But now the CIA, after a fresh check of Soviet oil production, has revised its estimates upward. Instead of a drop, there has been a steady increase, and the Soviet Union is now producing 12.1 million barrels of oil a day, making it the largest oil producer in the world, larger even than Saudi Arabia.

Soviet resources are vast, from the Caucasus in the Southwest to the Sakhalin islands in the East, where a new oil field is being explored with the help of Japan and the United States. The Soviet Union needs Western technology.

Professor Marshall Goldman.

PROFESSOR MARSHALL GOLDMAN: The Soviets are about 20 years behind Western technology in the petroleum field and the petroleum industry. And if they're going to continue to produce,

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going to find new fields, they really must have that technology.

KALB: With his recent study, "The Enigma of Soviet Petroleum: Half-Empty, Half-Full," Professor Goldman has challenged earlier official estimates, even the one forecasting a Soviet move against the Persian Gulf, specifically because of a thirst for oil.

GOLDMAN: I think that the Russians are interested in making mischief in the Persian Gulf, in the Middle East. After all, they made mischief in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has no oil. They don't need oil to want to create mischief. Their economy will survive without Middle East oil.

KALB: Still, the Pentagon insists, despite the new CIA estimates, that the Soviet Union remains a threat to Persian Gulf Oil because, in the Pentagon's view, Soviet oil production will level off and drop by the end of this decade. That provides part of the rationale for the continuing buildup of American power in the area.